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NSC STAFF FOR SINGH

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: ARRESTS OF PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS SPARK MORE
WORRIES ABOUT A BACKLASH

Classified by ECPO Counselor John P. Desrocher for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The recent detention of several dozen secular democracy activists, including the influential blogger Alaa Saif Al-Islam, on charges of insulting the president, has fueled concern among our pro-democracy contacts that the GOE is engaged in a comprehensive effort to put a lid on political reform. End summary.

Influential Blogger Among Dozens Detained in Recent Days

¶2. (C) Alaa Saif Al-Islam is the most prominent of the new detainees. With his wife Manal, Alaa runs an influential and award-winning pro-reform blog (www.manalaa.net). Alaa's activist credentials and connections are particularly strong: his father is Ahmed Saif Al-Islam, one of Egypt's most outspoken human rights activists who runs the leftist Hisham Mubarak Law Center, and his father-in-law is Bahey Eddin Hassan, director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, and an occasional participant in BMENA/Forum for the Future initiatives. Bahey Eddin Hassan, who has been in regular contact with poloff since Alaa's May 7 arrest, has confirmed the circumstances surrounding the arrests and detention of Alaa and his colleagues. (The arrests have been widely reported in the blogosphere, by wire services, and by Human Rights Watch in a May 9 press release.) Most importantly, in the view of Hassan and other democracy activists with whom we spoke, Alaa and the other demonstrators who were detained in connection with peaceful demonstrations in support of judicial independence, are all being investigated on charges of "insulting the president," "disturbing public order," and "spreading false rumors." The detainees, who are being investigated by the State Security Prosecutor under procedures established by the Emergency Law, are formally held under "pre-trial detention" a legal mechanism that allows the GOE to detain suspects for up to six months without charges, subject to a pro-forma renewal process every fifteen days. On May 8 and 9, the GOE renewed detention orders for 40 activists arrested in late April.

Dire Implications?

¶3. (C) All of our pro-democracy contacts are worried by the tough stance adopted by the GOE. According to Bahey Eddin

Hassan, the arrests are part of a trend dating back to the GOE violence against voters in the November-December parliamentary elections. Hassan noted that the GOE has made no move to investigate the election violence, but has instead allowed the GOE-controlled Supreme Judicial Council to launch investigations against the pro-reform judges who criticized the conduct of the bloody parliamentary elections. Hassan argued that the GOE has been emboldened by the fact that it has (in his view) faced relatively little domestic and international criticism for such actions as the December 24 conviction of Ayman Nour; the December 30 killings of 28 Sudanese refugees; the decision not to pursue a case against suspects in the May 25, 2005 referendum violence; the investigation of pro-reform judges; the postponement of the local elections; and the extension of the state of emergency.

Hassan said that the GOE is looking "to silence the new dynamism" of the pro-reform activists, and that the security apparatus is continuing to test the limits of the repressive measures it can take. "They will push and push until someone tells them to stop," said Hassan. "Worse things are coming."

14. (C) Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, echoed Hassan's fears: "Our meager reform achievements in 2005 did include real progress on peaceful demonstrations and media freedom. It looks like the government is trying to eliminate the demonstrations. I worry that the press is next." Bahgat noted that Ruz Al-Yusuf, the daily tabloid widely believed to be funded by NDP insiders and closely influenced by the Interior Ministry, has recently launched a series of stinging attacks on the two leading independent newspapers, the daily Al-Masry Al-Youm and the weekly Al-Dustour. Hisham Kassem, publisher of Al-Masry Al-Youm separately confirmed that the Ruz Al-Yusuf attacks on his paper give him cause for concern, but said that he sees no reason to change course in his news coverage or editorial content.

15. (C) Nadia Aboul Magd, a seasoned A reporter and long-time observer of Egyptian politics, told poloff on May 10 that she is increasingly worried about the direction of events. She flagged the April 25 detention of the Jazeera bureau chief for spreading misinformation in the aftermath of the Dahab bombings as another worrisome sign. (The Jazeera journalist was released on bail on April 26.) Aboul Magd said that she is pessimistic about the GOE's willingness to tolerate dissent, and she mused, only half-jokingly, about needing to get a visa for a western country, "just in case."

Busy Days Ahead

16. (C) On May 11, the disciplinary case against the pro-reform judges continues at the Supreme Court, and pro-democracy activists have announced plans to demonstrate in support of the judges. On May 18, Ayman Nour's appeal begins at the Court of Cassation. On May 25, the pro-reform judges have called for a protest to mark the investigation of their colleagues. The choice of May 25 is important, for that will be the one year anniversary of the 2005 referendum which approved the Article 76 amendment, and which was marked by vote rigging and unprosecuted thuggery against peaceful demonstrators. Many civil society activists have indicated to us their desire to support the independent judges through demonstrations or other expressions of solidarity on May 25. Engi Al-addad, a leader of Shayfeen.com, a monitoring group that is seeking to coordinate civil society solidarity with the judges, told poloff that she believes that security forces have begun to arrest secular democracy activists in order to eliminate their ability to rally around the judges on May 25.

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